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China's Lincolnophilia

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By Alan Wachman

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), Abraham Lincoln's stance on national unity during the U.S. Civil War and his opposition to the institution of slavery have been summoned up by PRC officials, media, and elites in efforts to explain and legitimate their own response to those they disparage as "separatists" in Taiwan and Tibet.

To Beijing, vigorously opposing separatism and preserving Chinese territorial integrity is a cause no less noble than was Abraham Lincoln's resort to war as a way of preventing the secession of southern states. In its quest for moral authority, Beijing has recalled the rhetoric and posture of Abraham Lincoln toward the Confederacy, apparently unaware that it has misconstrued Lincoln's sentiments by citing his words out of context, drawing erroneous lessons from the example of the U.S. Civil War.

The resort to Lincoln is not new. Prominent Chinese leaders have manifested a touch of Lincolnophilia since the start of the twentieth century. Sun Yat-sen, the Abrahamic forebear of both the Nationalist Party (KMT) of Chiang Kai-shek that was long the ruling party of the ROC and the Communist Party (CCP) of Mao Zedong that established the PRC, explicitly called up Lincoln as a model for his own nationalist creed—*The Three Principles of the People*. According to Lyon Sharman's volume, *Sun Yat-sen: His Life and Its Meaning, a Critical Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934), Sun reportedly wrote that his own three principles "correspond with the principles stated by President Lincoln—'government of the people, by the people, for the people.' I translated them into ... the people (are) to have . . . the people (are) to govern and . . . the people (are) to enjoy."

Sun's admiring effort to emulate the bold simplicity and cadence of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address became embedded in the hagiographic record of Sun's contributions to China's revolution, even though the *Three Principles of the People* only vaguely reflect the ideals Lincoln championed. The apparent link between Sun and Lincoln was enshrined in the first article of the 1947 Constitution of the Republic of China (ROC)—a document that remains in effect on Taiwan. It reads, "The Republic of China, founded on the Three Principles of the People, shall be a democratic republic of the people, to be governed by the people and for the people."

Indeed, so established was the putative link between Sun and Lincoln that in 1942 the United States commemorated the fifth anniversary of Japan's invasion of China by issuing a postage stamp featuring the images of both Abraham Lincoln and Sun Yat-sen. The stamp is inscribed with the passage from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address that inspired Sun, as well as the resulting *Three Principles*—in Chinese—that Sun devised. In 1959, the government of the Republic of China (ROC) produced its own commemorative stamp displaying the two "leaders of democracy."



Issued July 7, 1942, in Denver, Colorado, where Sun Yat-sen had been on October 11, 1911, when he learned of the revolution in China.



Chinese communists also associated themselves with Lincoln, among other American political icons. Michael Hunt, in his *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 1996) cites a July 4, 1944 article published in the *Jiefang Ribao* [Liberation Daily], the official press organ of the party. It proclaims that "The work which we Communists are carrying on today is the very same work which was carried on earlier in America by Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln." In addition, Mao Zedong reportedly told a Reuters correspondent in 1945, "a free, democratic China would. . . realize the 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' concept of Abraham Lincoln and the 'four freedoms' proposed by Franklin Roosevelt."

While references to Lincoln—and particularly to the standard of government that he articulated at Gettysburg—may thread through the political rhetoric of modern China, the effort by leaders of the PRC to invoke Abraham Lincoln's image and words in support of policy preferences seems to have

flourished in recent years. Rather than to use Lincoln's apparent populism as a way of validating and enhancing the prestige of the party's political program for just governance within China, PRC leaders refer to Lincoln's posture during the American Civil War to immunize themselves from criticism about their own unyielding insistence that Taiwan not be allowed to remain separate and Tibet not be allowed to separate from China.

To be sure, the interest in Lincoln waxes and wanes in the PRC. Former president Jiang Zemin, who attended an American missionary school near Shanghai, apparently takes pride in his capacity to recite the Gettysburg Address from memory, in English. He frequently cited Lincoln to reinforce his view that Beijing has an obligation to defend the unity of China—as he understands it—by force, if necessary, against any efforts to divide it. So enamored of Lincoln was Jiang that when *Fortune Magazine* hosted a glitzy confab in Shanghai in 1999, Gerald Levin, then president of AOL Time Warner, publicly presented the Chinese president with a bust of the sixteenth American president.

Former premier Zhu Rongji drew his arrow from the same quiver. Standing beside President Clinton in 1999, Zhu said "Abraham Lincoln, in order to maintain the unity of the United States and oppose independence of the southern part...resorted to the use of force and fought a war. ... So I think Abraham Lincoln...is a model."

Some years later, PRC premier Wen Jiabao told *The Washington Post* on the eve of his departure for the United States in November, 2003, "The Chinese people will pay any price to safeguard the unity of the motherland. I assume that you are familiar with the words of President Lincoln, who once said, 'a house divided against itself will not stand.' While Lincoln did, indeed, speak these words, the passage actually originated with the Bible, Matthew 12:25, as was Lincoln's wont. Lincoln used the phrase often, but it is most closely associated with a speech he gave in Springfield, Illinois, on June 16, 1858, after receiving the Republican nomination for Senator. Lincoln then invoked the passage repeatedly during his debates with Stephen Douglas, in the late summer and fall of that year. He also said "the Union (composed of States) is perpetual."

One wonders what Premier Wen makes of Lincoln's remarks elsewhere in the speech he cited—Lincoln's inaugural address of 1861. First, Lincoln describes the Union as emerging from a voluntary compact.

we find the proposition that, in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured and expressly declared and pledged, to be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was "to form a more perfect union."

While they oppose Beijing's expectation of unity, neither the people of Taiwan nor those of Tibet seek to withdraw from any compact they ever made. Yet, Beijing advances the view that it is justified in using force to preserve a single Chinese state of which Taiwan and Tibet are a part. Xu Shiquan, formerly the Director of the Institute of Taiwan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and then the vice president of the All-China Taiwan Studies Society, cited Lincoln's brief second inaugural address to highlight this point.

Xu is widely quoted in the PRC press referring to Lincoln as having said, "Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came." Xu presumably wishes to associate the PRC with Lincoln and the Union, resigned to fight only to ensure that the nation does not perish. However, the crux of Lincoln's address was not a claim that the Union alone was righteous in its willingness to fight for the preservation of the Union and the Confederacy unjust for making war. Lincoln's doleful address pivots on the citation of another Biblical verse—Matthew 18:7—which states, "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

The verse originates in an account of Jesus warning of the ill consequences that will befall anyone who would “offend” those who believe in him. Lincoln employs the passage to under-gird a statement of humility in the face of a war that he depicts as divine retribution to both North and South for having tolerated slavery on American soil. Lincoln states:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?

This was no boastful claim to moral superiority over a wanton and reckless adversary who had driven him to do what he preferred not to do. It was the resignation of a man who had witnessed the ravage of war and acquiesced in an understanding that the North was in some measure as culpable as the South and was being held to account by a just god whose punishment was the war itself.

PRC statesmen who cite Lincoln seem to imply that American citizens should appreciate the plight of the PRC and identify with it as analogous to that of the Union during the Civil War. They implore their audience to see them as responding no differently to the issue of China’s unity than did President Lincoln when he confronted the secession of southern states. Unfortunately, a shallow understanding of both American politics leading to the Civil War and of the opening chapter of that war make the recitation of Lincoln’s pledge to unity little more than a cheap parlor trick.

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